

Kishan is Happy Now

Om Prakash Singh

The alienation that children from marginalised communities experience in school due to various reasons is a matter of concern. The responsibility of understanding these reasons earnestly, and thereby, mitigating this alienation rests with the school. In this article, we learn how despite many challenges, a perceptive teacher, along with a colleague, manages to include Kishan, who faces discrimination, in play and learning activities in the school.

Why are the children so quiet? Is the school closed? These questions were running in my mind as I entered primary school. The school was so quiet, it seemed as though there were no children in the school. There are two female teachers in this school. Since one of them is unwell, the task of teaching-learning is undertaken entirely by one teacher. When I reached the school gate, I saw that it was locked from the inside. I thought that since there was only one teacher, she had closed the gate from inside so that children would not come outside and make noise. I knocked. A child opened the door. The teacher was not in the classroom, 22 of the 29 children were present. I asked the child, 'Where is your teacher?' 'She has gone to the village to call other children,' the child replied. I then asked, 'Why have you closed the door?' The child replied that since there was no teacher in the school, they were studying with the door closed.

This was a new experience for me, as children of this age are usually enthusiastic, noisy and fight a lot. How were these children so disciplined? I did not want to ask them too many questions since they seemed to be working through their foundational literacy and numeracy (FLN) workbooks. I went and sat in the classroom. The children came up to me to ask questions whenever they needed help – they did not seem to feel any fear or hesitation.

The teacher arrived with a student. When she saw me,

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Figure 1. A teacher needs to observe children's emotions.

she looked happy and said, 'I had gone to call the students from the community. When I came to the school this morning, only two students were here, so I went to visit each student's home to bring today's attendance up to 22.' 'Do you have to go and call the students from their homes every day?' I asked. 'No. The children had arrived on time today; I got delayed in reaching school, so they had returned home,' she said.

Whenever I visited this school, I always noticed that the behaviour of this teacher towards the students was very gentle, and yet, one of the students, Kishan looked frightened. He did not participate in the discussion with the teacher. Even when I tried to include him in the classroom discussions, he would start looking troubled and uncomfortable. Why is he not participating in class activities? Why does he feel uncomfortable mixing with other children in the class? These questions ran through my head. 'This child is in class III but cannot even read or write. He is a slow learner,' the teacher said. I got a bit

uncomfortable hearing the phrase 'slow learner'. I wanted to know how the teacher had arrived at this conclusion. 'He stays away from all the other children and never participates in the class activities,' she explained. Since I visit this school often, the children are familiar with me. I said to Kishan, '*Mandi-i-chch*' (which means 'to eat' in *Kurukh*); though I do not know the language well, I have learned a few words from the children). He responded, 'No, I will eat later.' Hearing his response, I realised he was just like the other children.

Why does Kishan not mingle with other children?

The other children at the school were very comfortable around me. I asked them, 'Why doesn't Kishan spend time with you all?' Their responses unsettled me. One child said, 'We do not talk to him because his family eats pork.' Another added, 'His father kills birds and eats them.' A third child said, 'Kishan's family is *Asur* (a term referring to a primitive tribe in Jharkhand), and we do not understand his language, so we do not talk to him.' Another child remarked, 'I feel disgusted even looking at him, so I do not let him sit near me.' When I asked this child why she felt this way, she replied matter-of-factly, 'Oh, you don't know! They are really dirty. Who would want to touch them?'

This experience was new for me considering the region had a tribal majority. All I could think about now was how to get Kishan out of this situation, how to get the other children to understand that he was just like them. The teacher was sitting at a little distance and intermittently listening to our conversations. Her face made it evident that she was not happy about the children speaking in this manner. Then during the mid-day meal, I discussed the behaviour of other children towards Kishan with the teacher. I assured her that if he was given a positive environment, similar to that of the other children, his learning too would be like theirs.

The atmosphere of the school had turned Kishan into a child who always remained quiet. He neither talked to the other children nor had his mid-day meals with them. I directed the teacher's attention to this. The teacher asked, 'How can I work with Kishan separately? I cannot ignore all the other children for one child.' I could empathise with the challenge the teacher faced.

Kishan likes to play

Children love to play. While playing, they forget which child belongs to which religion, caste, or community. Something similar happened at school that day. After the language and maths classes ended, the teacher and I took the children outside and started playing *Chuha-Billi* (cat and mouse). Kishan actively participated in the game.

Whenever he played the 'mouse', no one could catch him. He ran incredibly fast. He was so fast that even class V students could not keep pace with this student of class III! With this, everyone in school came to know that Kishan is a swift runner! The teacher also understood that he was just like any other child. Now we wanted to get the other children in the class to accept that Kishan was their friend and that the teacher was also paying attention to him.

The teacher started focusing on Kishan's work in class. She was not able to believe that a child whom she assumed to be a slow learner was just like the other children. The reason Kishan was not learning like the other children was because of the discrimination or alienation he faced. After observing his enthusiasm for games, the teacher understood why he was not engaged in the classroom. She noticed that Kishan came to school on time every day, but he struggled to make a connection with the other children, which left him feeling sad and isolated throughout the day.

Now the challenge confronting the teacher was to work with Kishan while keeping in mind the learning level of all the other children in the class. What could she do in class so that the other children would mingle with him? After much thought, we decided that we would do some storytelling every day, followed by discussions. Based on this plan, the teacher chose some interesting stories and started reading and discussing them in class. Some of the stories in her selection were *Adiyal Gaay* (the stubborn cow), *Chatur Kargosh* (the clever rabbit), *Dost ki madad* (helping a friend) etc.

Children enjoyed listening to *Adiyal Gaay* a lot, since barring one or two characters, all others were very relatable to them. Children have often seen cows who trouble their owners while giving milk. Based on their experiences, children offered suggestions on how a cow can be moved off the road. Most children said that by pulling the cow's tail one can immediately get her to stand up. One child suggested that they could attach a rope to the cow and pull it. Even after a long discussion around the story, no one suggested that a cow could be moved from the road by affectionately offering her grass to eat.

The story of *Chatur Khargosh* was not new to the children. They were still enjoying it as if they were hearing it for the first time. However, the children did not take much interest in the activity of guessing what happened next by stopping the story midway. Here are some examples of the conversation with children after a story:

The first question that we asked the children was, 'Why would the rabbit have asked the lion to jump into the well?' The children answered that since the lion was killing the animals of the forest and eating them, the rabbit did this to save all the other animals.

The second question was, 'When all the animals in the forest had made a pact with the lion, would you still say that what the rabbit did was right?' The children unanimously replied that the rabbit was right.

The third question we asked them was, 'It is possible that the lion had children and after the lion died, they would also die of hunger. Should the rabbit have broken the pact?' Most of the children remained quiet on this.

We noticed that the children often put themselves in the shoes of that character in a story who was shown to be weaker. In the cow story, the children's sympathy lay with the owner of the cow, even when they knew that the owner had given the cow less fodder. They still suggested that the cow would start moving if hit by a stick. Similarly, in the second story when they were asked whether the rabbit did the right thing by breaking the pact, they said yes. Thinking through all this, we were satisfied that Kishan was also participating in the discussions that followed the stories. He had tried to share his ideas as well. Our experience suggested that when children are given an opportunity to have an open discussion after a story, they grasp values better.

Through the storytelling sessions, we realised that although children seemed to sympathise with the weaker character in the story, they were not doing the same in real life. We understood that apart from storytelling, we needed to make changes to classroom processes as well.

Teacher's participation in the mid-day meal

We realised that we had to do some activities that would demonstrate to the students that Kishan was just like them and they could also be friends with him.

For this, the teacher started sharing the mid-day meals with the students. This was the first time in the school that the teacher was sitting with the students to eat. She asked Kishan to sit beside her. All the children were enjoying having meals with the teacher. In this manner, the teacher continued to have her afternoon meal with

the students. She continued to ask Kishan to sit with her. As a result, Kishan became quite comfortable with the teacher and slowly, the other children also started talking to him.

Although everything was going fine in school, the challenges for the teacher remained. The community was not willing to accept the fact that Kishan was sitting with the teacher during meals. Some parents even came to talk to the teacher about this. To address the issue, the teacher called for a parent-teacher meeting where she not only shared the learning progress of the children but also asked the parents to participate in other school-related activities. Seeing Kishan's enthusiasm and progress, the parents began to feel that like him, the other children could also learn much better.

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Getting all the children to participate in games every day

The teacher introduced an hour of play in the school each day. She got the children to participate in javelin throw, archery, playing with marbles etc. Kishan was very competent in these sports. He performed very well in the javelin throw. As an outcome of the regular organisation of regional games and sports in school, and because of Kishan's good performance in them, other children started to interact with him more.

Along with this, the teacher continued to speak and narrate stories in *Kudukh* in the class. It is now a pleasure to see Kishan in school. He is interacting with all the other children, and they also now talk to him.

Translated from Hindi by Eklavya, Bhopal

Endnotes

- i. Kurukh is a North Dravidian language spoken by the Kurukh and Kisan people of East India.



Omprakash Singh has worked with teachers and community members on social and educational issues in various organisations for around three years. He has been working with the Azim Premji Foundation in the Chainpur block of Gumla district in Jharkhand since December 2022. His interest lies in working with teachers to create innovative teaching-learning practices and document their experiences.

Contact: omprakash.singh@azimpremjifoundation.org